

Gail Collins, *New York Times*

The House of Representatives has been cutting like crazy! Down with Planned Parenthood and PBS! We can't afford to worry about mercury contamination! Safety nets are too expensive!

But keep your hands off the Defense Department's budget to sponsor Nascar racers.

"It's a great public/private partnership," said Representative Rodney Frelinghuysen, a New Jersey Republican.

The Defense Department claims racecar sponsorships are an important recruiting tool for the Army. The House agreed - although this might be news to the Navy and Marines, which decided a while back that a Nascar presence wasn't worth the money.

"What makes U.S. Army's motorsports initiatives successful?" Ryan Newman, driver of No. 39 U.S. Army Chevrolet asked his Facebook readers as he urged a show of support for the program. "In a 2009 study among fans nationwide, 37% feel more positive about the Army due to its involvement in motorsports."

Let's stop right here and think about this posting. Is it likely that racing fans would think less of the Army for sponsoring racecars? Actually, wouldn't you expect the percentage to be higher? Also, how many of you believe Ryan Newman actually wrote those sentences. Can I see a show of hands?

Representative Betty McCollum of Minnesota, who sponsored an amendment eliminating the military's Nascar connection, said it could save taxpayers "tens of millions of dollars." She got a flood of angry letters and one death threat. Also, her amendment was rejected, 148 to 281. The opponents didn't bother with much debate. "This amendment is about politics in certain districts for certain groups of people," said Representative Patrick McHenry of North Carolina, a tad obliquely.

McHenry was probably referring to the Democrats, who've often been branded by the

Republicans as tennis-watching snobs. The Obamaites actually spend vast amounts of time and money trying to woo "Nascar dads," although given car racing's sinking popularity, it might make more sense to target some other fan base.

What about all the people who play games on their cellphones and iPads? Make 2012 the Year of the Angry Birds Dad or the Brickbreaker Aunt.

But I digress. On Friday, the House was working its way through 129 amendments to its continuing budget resolution. There would have been 130, but Representative Steve Womack of Arkansas retracted his proposal to cut off financing for President Obama's teleprompter.

The majority did vote, however, to eliminate money for a park in Nancy Pelosi's district. The former House speaker has been demonized to the point that it's safe to do anything to her short of kidnapping the family dog.

Let's give Speaker John Boehner credit for keeping his promise to give members more chance to debate and offer amendments. Really, if things get any more open, the members will start throwing themselves off the balcony. But not such high marks on consistency. The newly ascendant Republicans have been howling that the deficit is so big, so threatening, that no target for cutting is sacred. "Everything is on the table. We're broke," said Boehner.

But the table is mainly crowded with stuff the Republicans didn't like to begin with. Family-planning money and environmental protection, but not oil tax breaks or Nascar sponsorships. "Sesame Street" is fair game, but the Daytona 500 is untouchable.

"Spending is out of control," cried Jim Jordan, the chairman of the Republican Study Committee, who argued for additional cuts in all nonsecurity discretionary spending - except aid to Israel.

In Wisconsin, the new Republican governor, Scott Walker, wants to strip state employees of their collective-bargaining rights because: "We're broke. We've been broke in this state for years."

Wisconsin's Democratic state senators went into hiding to deprive the Republican majority of the quorum they need to pass Walker's agenda. The Senate majority leader, Scott Fitzgerald - who happens to be the brother of the Assembly speaker, Jeff Fitzgerald - believes the governor is absolutely right about the need for draconian measures to cut spending in this crisis. So he's been sending state troopers out to look for the missing Democrats.

The troopers are under the direction of the new chief of the state patrol, Stephen Fitzgerald. He is the 68-year-old father of Jeff and Scott and was appointed to the \$105,678 post this month by Governor Walker.

Perhaps the speaker's/majority leader's father was a super choice, and the fact that he was suddenly at liberty after having recently lost an election for county sheriff was simply a coincidence that allowed the governor to recruit the best possible person for the job. You'd still think that if things are so dire in Wisconsin, the Fitzgerald clan would want to set a better austerity example.

And if Big Bird goes, we can spare the U.S. Army Chevrolet, too.